

FRANCE - Back in NATO? Is this for real?

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April 15, 2008 - Nicolas Sarkozy has gone out of his way to sound pro-American. He made a special visit in 2007 to Kennebunkport to have a cozy meeting with George W. Bush. Since neither spoke the other's language, they must have had translators. So perhaps I might be allowed to try to translate what has been going on.

Yes, Sarkozy is using a discourse that sounds much better to American ears than that of any of his predecessors for a long time. Yes, it is now old reliable Germany with a conservative chancellor who seems to be worrying the United States government far more than old unreliable anti-American France. And yes, Sarkozy seems to share the same rhetoric that Bush uses about Iran, Afghanistan, and Israel (though not yet Iraq).

But note a few reservations that have been quietly slipped into the discourse. The French are sending 800 more troops to Afghanistan, but only to the eastern region. This liberates some American troops to be sent down to the south, which is the truly dangerous region. The Canadians have insisted on reinforcements in the south, where they have been virtually alone holding the fort, or else they said they would pull out altogether. The Germans, British, and Dutch all refused to send their troops to the south. For this they were denounced by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Now France has kindly made it possible for the Americans to fulfill the mission it had asked other countries to fulfill. Quelle générosité d'esprit!

And yes, France voted at the NATO meeting to endorse the U.S. proposal to establish missile defense operations in Poland and the Czech Republic. But France loudly joined Germany (and Great Britain, Benelux, Spain, and Italy) in refusing to allow the applications of Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership to move forward on the grounds that it would be provocative to Russia. France thus allowed George W. Bush to try his luck at settling this matter directly with Vladimir Putin. Quelle générosité d'esprit!

And France said that it would now become a "full and entire" participant in NATO, because - or was it on the proviso that - the United States now endorses the principle of a unified European defense force, always to be sure one that would be linked somehow to NATO. Considering that the United States has been fighting tooth and nail for the last twenty years against the idea of a unified European defense force, this seems like not a small proviso. It's true that President Bush verbally endorsed the idea at the recent Bucharest meeting of NATO. But, as Le Monde warned in its editorial of April 4 on "France and NATO," Bush's speech was only a speech. "Before rescinding the 1966 decision [of France's withdrawal from the integrated command of NATO], Mr. Sarkozy should receive some real American guarantees, not just a speech." In any case, Sarkozy said in his speech at Bucharest that a European defense force was both his "ambition" and his "priority." So, it's clear the matter is not yet really sewn up.

When on March 7, 1966, General De Gaulle withdrew France from the integrated command structure of NATO, he accomplished one major thing. All American troops plus the headquarters of NATO had to leave France. Actually, it was not a sudden decision. France had been slowly withdrawing from the integrated structure for years before. And when France exploded their nuclear weapons, De Gaulle announced they were to be used to protect France tous azimuts (in all directions), which was not exactly pleasant for the United States to hear. But De Gaulle was careful to say that France remained part of NATO - just a sovereign part of NATO, with no French troops under American command.

Just as getting out of the NATO integrated command was a gradual process, so has been its full reintegration. It was Jacques Chirac, not Nicolas Sarkozy, who started the process in 1995, by having

France rejoin the military committee of NATO. And as we can see, France has not yet gone much further than that. As France was never really out of NATO, it is not now going to be really in.

What then is the point of this loud display of policy change? Le Monde started its editorial with the phrase, "Symbols matter." De Gaulle had made one symbolic statement - that of an independent French foreign policy. What is Sarkozy trying to symbolize today? It is not, as Le Monde pointed out, actual reintegration since, for all effects and purposes, France is already largely reintegrated.

There are two possible answers to this question. On the one hand, Sarkozy has been undertaking a generational makeover of the French right. He was opposed in his ascent to power within the right by all the remaining (now aging) Gaullist cadres. He seems to be trying to purge the omnipresence of De Gaulle in French political reality, and relegate him to the museum status he recently achieved in the so-called De Gaulle historial at the military museum of Les Invalides in Paris. This is possibly a dangerous game for Sarkozy to play, since probably for another ten years or so, the figure of De Gaulle will continue to loom large among the French right.

The other possible answer is that he is trying to fulfill the Gaullist heritage by stealth. It is clear that a unified European defense force is very Gaullist in tonality. After all, one can mouth whatever assurances one wants about how this force would complement and never oppose NATO. But what it means is that, once it is created, the Europeans could vote to dissolve NATO and be left not only with the European Union and the euro, but with a meaningful armed force. And this armed force could conceivably make a deal with Russia.

In any case, it is far too early for U.S. neo-cons to gloat about recuperating France into their fold.

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